

# Hilda L. Solis

1957–

UNITED STATES REPRESENTATIVE 2001–2009

DEMOCRAT FROM CALIFORNIA

An accomplished legislator in the California assembly, Hilda Solis was elected to the U.S. House from a district in Southern California after she defeated an 18-year incumbent in the primary. In Congress, Representative Solis championed the interests of working families and women and focused on legislation about health care and environmental protection. “People need to better understand that environmental justice issues are issues of better health care, better education, and an opportunity to begin to clean up their communities and enhance economic development in a positive way so that everybody can grow and prosper, and children, whether they are rich or poor, can live in a clean environment,” Solis once remarked.<sup>1</sup>

The third of seven children, Hilda Lucia Solis was born to Raul and Juana Sequiera Solis in Los Angeles, California, on October 20, 1957. Solis’s father and mother were immigrants from Mexico and Nicaragua, respectively, who met in a class on U.S. citizenship. Her parents worked blue-collar jobs—her father at a battery plant and mother on a toy assembly line—and Solis assumed many domestic duties early in life. “It wasn’t what you would call the all-American life for a young girl growing up,” she said. “We had to mature very quickly.”<sup>2</sup> She later remarked, “They came here with that hope—esperanza—of coming to a country that would allow their children to prosper. I was born here. But I still have the notion that my parents have instilled in me, that they want a better life and they know that there’s opportunities for us here.”<sup>3</sup> After earning a B.A. in political science in 1979 from California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, Solis worked in the White House Office of Hispanic Affairs during the James Earl (Jimmy) Carter administration. In 1981 she earned an M.A. in public administration from the University of Southern California. Later that year, she worked as

a management analyst in the civil rights division of the Equal Opportunity Program at the Office of Management and Budget. In June 1982, Solis married Sam Sayyad, a small business owner, and returned to Southern California, where she became a field representative in the office of Assemblyman Art Torres. She also worked as the director of the California Student Opportunity and Access Program in Whittier from 1982 until 1992.

Solis’s first venture into politics was at the local level. In 1985 she ran an intensive grass-roots campaign against better-known candidates for a position as a trustee of Rio Hondo Community College. She walked the local precincts tirelessly and gained an upset victory as the top vote-getter.<sup>4</sup> Solis served as a trustee for seven years, winning re-election in 1989. In 1992 she won election to the California assembly, serving there until 1994, when she was elected to the state senate. She was the youngest member in that body at the time of her election and its first-ever Latina. Solis chaired the industrial relations committee, where in 1996 she led the fight to raise California’s minimum wage standards. As a state senator, Solis also authored environmental protection legislation, including a bill that created the San Gabriel and Los Angeles Rivers and Mountains Conservancy to preserve open spaces and habitat, restore the watershed, and promote recreational activities that did not harm the environment.<sup>5</sup> Her environmental justice legislation earned her a John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award in 2000. She was the first woman to receive this award.<sup>6</sup>

Facing term limits in the California senate, Solis decided in 2000 to challenge Matthew Martínez, a nine-term Democratic incumbent whose U.S. congressional district encompassed much of her state senate district in the San Gabriel Valley. Just east of Los Angeles, the district swept across the lower two-thirds of the valley, taking in El







Monte and West Covina and part of Monterey Park. Labor unions, with which Solis had closely allied herself, and the state party switched their support to the challenger. The campaign split local Latino leaders as well as members of the California congressional delegation.<sup>7</sup> Portraying herself as an active progressive, in contrast to Martínez, with his low-key style, Solis prevailed in the March 7 primary, 62 to 29 percent.<sup>8</sup> She had no Republican challenger in the general election and captured 80 percent of the vote while three third-party candidates split the remainder. She easily won re-election four times, earning a fourth term in the House with 83 percent of the vote in 2006 and running unopposed for a fifth term in 2008.<sup>9</sup>

When Solis took her seat in the House in January 2001, she won assignments on the Education and Workforce Committee and the Resources Committee. Solis also was tapped as the Democratic freshman class whip in the 107th Congress (2001–2003). In the 108th Congress (2003–2005), she left those committees to become the first Latina member of the powerful Energy and Commerce Committee and the Ranking Member on the Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee.<sup>10</sup> She also was elected chairwoman of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Task Force on Health, and Democratic vice chair of the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues. In the 109th Congress (2005–2007), she was elected Democratic chair of the Congressional Caucus on Women's Issues and chair of the Democratic Women's Working Group. She was the first Latina to hold these positions.

When the Democrats gained control of the House in the 110th Congress (2007–2009), Solis was assigned to the Natural Resources Committee and the Select Committee on Energy Independence and Global Warming. Solis retained her assignment on Energy and Commerce, serving as vice chair of the Environment and Hazardous Materials Subcommittee. She was also appointed vice chairman of the Democratic Steering and Policy Committee, which made committee assignments.<sup>11</sup>

In the U.S. House, Solis advanced the environmental justice agenda she had championed at the state level. In 2003 her San Gabriel River Watershed Study Act was

signed into law with bipartisan support. The bill authorized the Secretary of the Interior to study the San Gabriel River to find out how the federal government could improve the area's recreational and environmental opportunities. Solis believed this was particularly important in an area that had been overbuilt, in which 25 percent of the water was contaminated and a disproportionately high number of children suffered from asthma.<sup>12</sup> "This will hopefully provide some type of relief for over 2 million people that reside along the San Gabriel River," Solis noted on the House Floor. "I grew up there as a child and spent many Saturday afternoons and vacations in this area. Something we like to talk about is the fact that so many people in that area come from largely low-income, underrepresented areas, and do not have the ability or the economic means to go to Sequoia, to go to Yosemite, to even go to the beach.... Their recreation occurs in this particular geographic area."<sup>13</sup> In 2005 Solis authored an amendment to prevent the testing of pesticides on humans; the amendment was later enacted into law. She carefully monitored Environmental Protection Agency policies that affected her district, where several Superfund sites (areas deemed by the federal government to be especially polluted) were located and where numerous water wells had been shut down because rocket fuel had seeped into the water table.<sup>14</sup>

Solis was also a longtime advocate for women's rights, particularly for victims of violence and domestic abuse. During her tenure in the House, she raised awareness about the murders, dating to 1993, of nearly 400 girls and women in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico. She led a congressional delegation to the city, located just five minutes from the U.S. border, to help publicize the brutality and the families' heart-wrenching losses. In 2006 Solis, with support from House colleagues Ileana Ros-Lehtinen of Florida and Tom Lantos of California, authored a resolution to condemn the murders, to express sympathy for the families of the victims, and to urge the United States to increase its efforts to end such human rights violations. "I have always believed that attacks on women are attacks on women everywhere," Solis told colleagues on



the House Floor. “I felt compelled as a woman, as a Latina, as someone who felt very strongly that, if we are going to stand up for women’s rights in other continents of the world and the Middle East and to defend Afghani women who are being tortured by the Taliban, why not then also come forward and support the women of Ciudad Juárez?”<sup>15</sup> The House passed the measure. In the 110th Congress, Solis sponsored a similar measure expressing sympathy and concern about the violence that had claimed the lives of more than 2,000 women and girls in Guatemala since 2001.<sup>16</sup> This measure also passed the House.

As chair of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Task Force on Health, Solis traveled across the country to educate policymakers, advocates, and community leaders about health needs in the Latino community. In the 109th Congress, Solis was a lead coauthor of a bicameral bill addressing minority health, The Healthcare Equality and Accountability Act.<sup>17</sup> During her eight years in the House, she introduced more than 75 measures, many of which pertained not only to environmental and women’s issues but also to the concerns of recent immigrants, labor, and access to health care. “I’ve always been a big believer that government, if done right, can do a lot to improve the quality of people’s lives,” Solis observed.<sup>18</sup>

In December 2008, President-elect Barack Obama chose Representative Solis to serve as Secretary of Labor.<sup>19</sup> Solis resigned her seat in the House on February 24, 2009, shortly after the U.S. Senate confirmed her appointment.

## FOR FURTHER READING

*Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, “Hilda L. Solis,” <http://bioguide.congress.gov>.

## NOTES

- 1 *Congressional Record*, House, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (8 April 2003): H2924.
- 2 *Politics in America*, 2008 (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly, Inc., 2007): 134.
- 3 Dan Morian and Evelyn Larrubia, “Roots of Solis’ Belief in Unions Run Deep,” 9 January 2009, *Los Angeles Times*: A1. See also

*Congressional Record*, Extensions of Remarks, House, 111th Cong., 1st sess. (24 February 2009): E337.

- 4 Jean Merl, “Solis Prepares to Take Another Step Up,” 28 December 2000, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
- 5 *Congressional Record*, Extensions of Remarks, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (4 January 2005): E16.
- 6 *Almanac of American Politics*, 2002 (Washington, D.C.: National Journal Inc., 2001): 241–242; “Official Biography of Hilda Solis,” <http://www.house.gov/solis/bio.htm> (accessed 21 November 2001).
- 7 John Mercurio, “Martinez Fights for Survival; Calif. Member Battles Solis, Former Allies,” 2 March 2000, *Roll Call*; Mary Lynn Jones, “Rep. Martinez Facing Tough Primary in Los Angeles CD,” 1 March 2000, *The Hill*: 13.
- 8 Jean Merl and Antonio Olivo, “Solis Trounces Martinez in Bitter Race; Challenger Ousts 18-Year Veteran in a Fight That Split the Latino Leadership,” 8 March 2000, *Los Angeles Times*: A3; Richard Simon and Antonio Olivo, “Two Incumbent Congressmen Facing Tough Challenges; 31st District: For Martinez, the Fight Is in the Primary—and in the Family,” 23 February 2000, *Los Angeles Times*: B1.
- 9 See “Election Statistics, 1920 to Present,” <http://history.house.gov/institution/election-statistics/election-statistics>.
- 10 For all Solis’s committee assignments, see Garrison Nelson and Charles Stewart III, *Committees in the U.S. Congress, 1993–2010* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2011): 958.
- 11 *Politics in America*, 2008: 133.
- 12 *Congressional Record*, Extensions of Remarks, House, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (31 January 2003): E117.
- 13 *Congressional Record*, House, 108th Cong., 1st sess. (19 March 2003): H1964. Solis first introduced the measure during her freshman term; see *Congressional Record*, House, 107th Cong., 1st sess. (17 July 2001): H4022–H4023.
- 14 *Politics in America*, 2008: 133.
- 15 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 2nd sess. (2 May 2006): H1945–H1946.
- 16 H. Res. 100, 110th Cong., 1st sess.: “Expressing the Sympathy of the House of Representatives to the Families of Women and Girls Murdered in Guatemala and Encouraging the Government of Guatemala to Bring an End to These Crimes.”
- 17 *Congressional Record*, House, 109th Cong., 1st sess. (21 July 2005): H6208–H6209.
- 18 Merl, “Solis Prepares to Take Another Step Up.”
- 19 Anne E. Kornblut, “Obama to Announce Final Cabinet Picks,” 19 December 2008, *Washington Post*: A2.